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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that a lack of assertiveness may be an important component of the psychological make-up of bulimic women, and that bulimic women may experience particular difficulties in asserting themselves in interactions with men. In this study, 23 women reporting the symptoms of bulimia by high scores on the Bulimia Test (BULIT) and 21 women reporting low BULIT scorers completed several self-report scales, including the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI) before interacting with either a male or a female confederate who made five increasingly demanding requests. In vivo interactions were videotaped and tapes were rated for behavior by a rater blind to subjects' BULIT scores. The results revealed that, compared to low scorers, high scorers on the BULIT obtained significantly higher scores on the BDI, displayed significantly shorter latencies of response to the confederate's requests, and manifested significantly lower overall verbal assertiveness in response to confederate's requests. Compared to other conditions, a disproportionate number of high scorers complied with all requests of the male confederate. (Author/NB)

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ASSERTIVENESS IN WOMEN REPORTING SYMPTOMS OF BULIMIA

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ASSERTIVENESS IN WOMEN REPORTING SYMPTOMS OF BULIMIA

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ABSTRACT

It has been suggested that a lack of assertiveness may be an important component of the total psychological make-up of bulimic women, and that lowered assertiveness may serve as an antecedent to binging and purging behaviors. It has also been suggested that bulimic women experience particular difficulties in asserting themselves in their interactions with men. Women reporting the symptoms of bulimia [high scorers on the Bulimia Test (BULIT; Smith & Thelen, 1984); scores $\geq$ 102] and women not reporting symptoms of bulimia (low scorers on the BULIT; 40th percentile $\leq$ scores $\leq$ 60th percentile) interacted with either a male or a female confederate who made a series of five increasingly demanding requests. These in vivo interactions were videotaped for later rating of several types of behaviors by a rater blind to subjects' BULIT scores.

High scorers on the BULIT obtained significantly higher scores on the Beck Depression Inventory than Low scorers. In addition, High scorers on the BULIT displayed significantly shorter latencies of response to the confederate's requests than Low scorers, and High scorers manifested significantly lower overall verbal assertiveness than Low scorers in response to the confederate's requests. In addition, a disproportionate number of High scorers complied with all of the requests of the male confederate, relative to the numbers of High scorers who complied with all of the requests of the female confederate, and relative to the numbers of Low scorers who complied with all of the requests of either the male or female confederate. Similarly, in response to the fifth (and most demanding) of the confederate's requests, High scorers displayed lower verbal assertiveness with the male confederate than with a female, while Low scorers displayed the reverse pattern of verbal assertiveness.

The results clearly indicate that women who report the symptoms of bulimia also report higher levels of depressed affect, exhibit lower levels of verbal assertiveness to demanding requests, and respond more quickly to requests (perhaps more impulsively) than women who do not report the symptoms of bulimia. In addition, the results suggest that assertiveness may be particularly problemmatic for bulimic women during their interactions with a male.

PROCEDURE

A total of 478 female students in introductory psychology classes were screened by means of the Bulimia Test (BULIT; Smith & Thelen, 1984). Twenty-three women scoring 102 or greater on the BULIT (the criterion score suggested by Smith & Thelen, 1984, for a preliminary diagnosis of bulimia) completed the assertiveness portion of the

experiment, as did twenty-one women scoring between the 40th and 60th percentiles (scores of 57 to 63) on the BULIT (see Table 1).

Prior to the arrival of the confederate, the subject was asked to fill out several self-report scales, including the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI; Beck, Ward, Mendelson, Mock, & Erbaugh, 1961). The in vivo situation utilized in the present experiment was adapted from Higgins, Frisch, and Smith (1983). In brief, each subject was left alone with a confederate who initiated an interaction. The confederate made a series of five increasingly demanding requests to borrow the subject's notes from the introductory psychology course that the subject was taking and that the confederate was supposedly taking. This series of requests culminated in a request to borrow the subject's notes the night before the next examination and to return them the day after the examination. The confederate terminated his or her requests if the subject gave an unequivocal refusal to any request. The confederates were blind to the subject's BULIT scores.

The responses of the subject were recorded on videotape and were later rated on several dimensions adapted from Higgins et al. (1983). The rater was also blind to the subject's BULIT scores. Ratings were made of the subject's behavior prior to and following the requests made by the confederate.

RESULTS

High scorers on the BULIT obtained significantly higher scores on the BDI than did Low scorers on the BULIT, F (1,40) = 10.99, $p < .01$ (see Table 2). High scorers on the BULIT also manifested lower verbal assertion scores following the confederate's requests than did Low scorers, F (1,40) = 5.45, $p < .05$ (see Table 2). In addition, High scorers on the BULIT displayed shorter latencies than Low scorers in their responses to the confederate's requests F (1,40) = 6.17, $p < .05$ (see Figure 1).

The number of women in each group who did not make any assertive responses to the series of requests from the confederate are presented in Table 2, as are the numbers of women in each group who made one or more assertive responses following the requests. Women who scored high on the BULIT manifested significantly less likelihood of being assertive with a male confederate, relative to the other three groups, $\chi^2(3) = 7.95$, $p < .05$. Mean ratings of the verbal assertion of subjects to the fifth (and most demanding) request of the confederate are displayed in Figure 2. There was a significant BULIT score X Sex of confederate interaction for this variable, F (1,40) = 4.13, $p < .05$. High scorers interacting with a male confederate displayed the least amount of assertion of all the groups, whereas Low scorers interacting with a male confederate exhibited the most amount of assertion of all groups (see Figure 2).

CONCLUSIONS

The results clearly indicated that women who report the symptoms of bulimia differ in several important respects from women who do not manifest those symptoms. High scorers on the BULIT reported more depression, were rated as less assertive to demands, and displayed shorter latency of response to demands than Low scorers on the BULIT. These results suggest that depression, lowered asssertiveness, and impulsivity in response to interpersonal demands are related to bulimia.

In addition, the results indicated that women who report symptoms of bulimia were less likely to respond assertively when interacting with a male, relative to a female. Thus, it appears that assertiveness may be particularly problematic for bulimic women in their interactions with men.

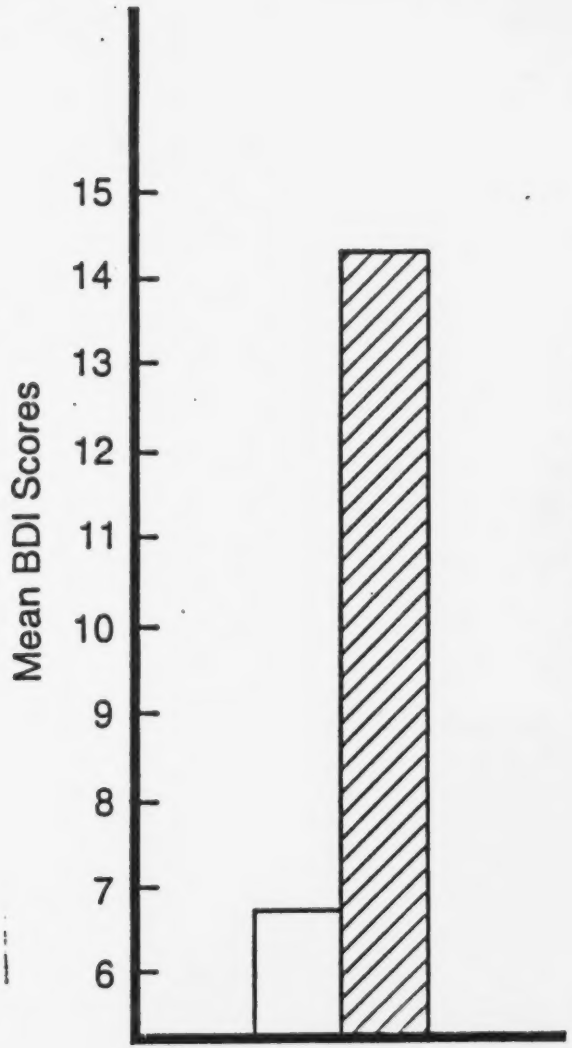
Table 1: Mean BULIT score and number of subjects in each group

	Mean BULIT score	Range	n
High scorers			
Male confederate	115.4	102-152	12
Female confederate	112.3	102-129	11
Low scorers			
Male confederate	59.5	57-63	11
Female confederate	59.2	57-63	10

Table 2: Number of subjects in each group who made one or more assertive responses to the requests of the confederate

	No assertive responses	One or more assertive responses
High scorers		
Male confederate	9	3
Female confederate	3	8
Low scorers		
Male confederate	3	8
Female confederate	3	7

Figure 1: Mean scores on the Beck Depression Inventory (BDI), latency or response to confederate's requests, and verbal assertiveness ratings during requests for High scorers and Low scorers on the BULIT



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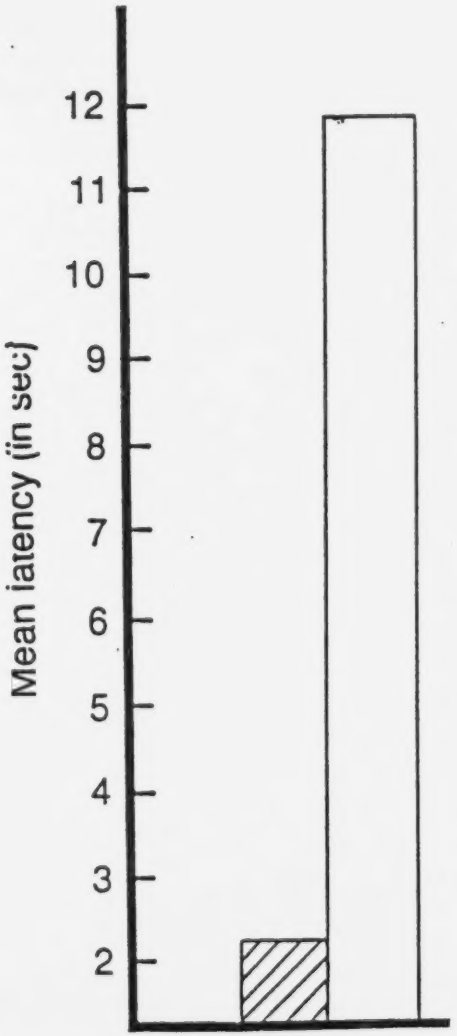

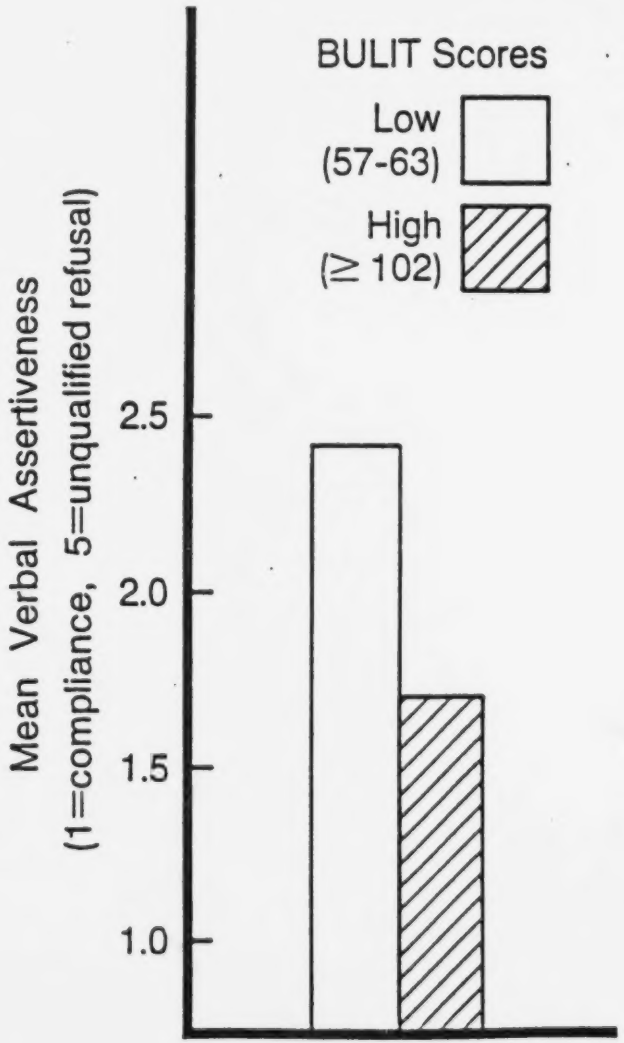

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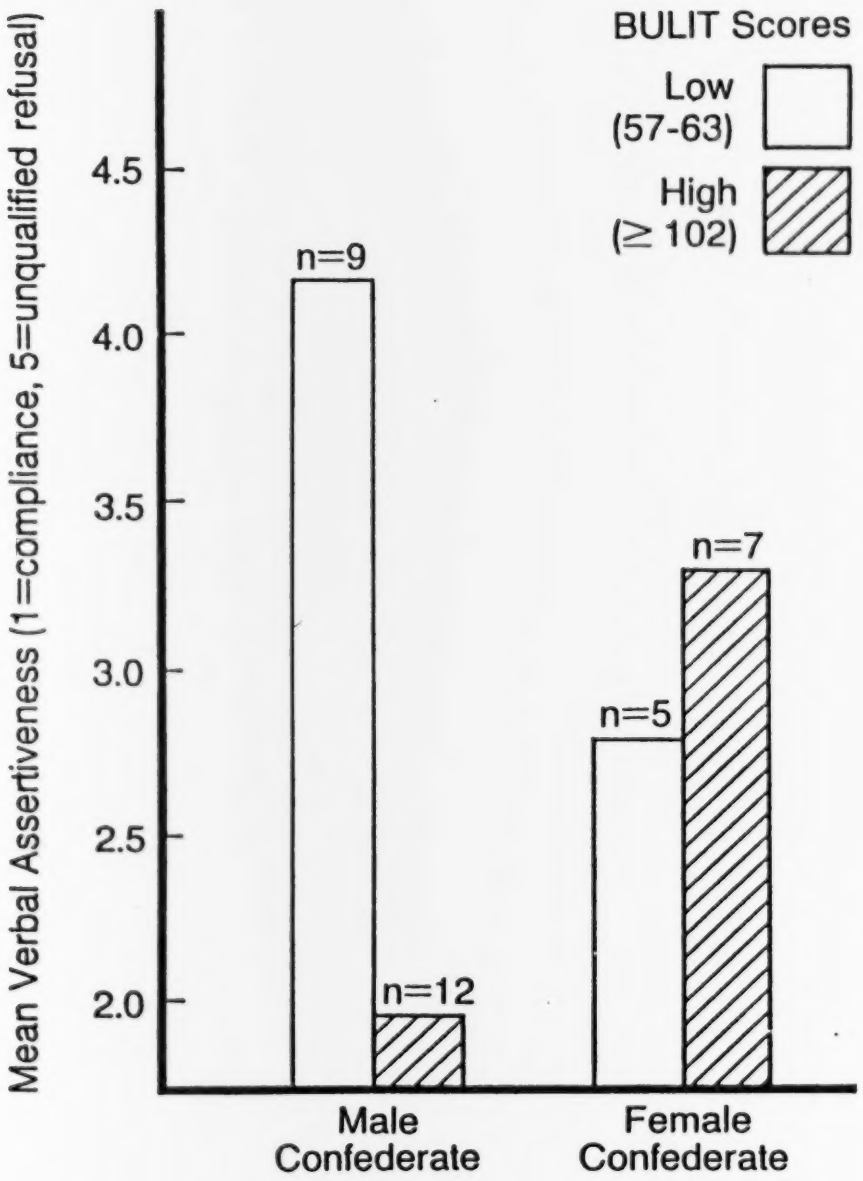
FIGURE 2: NUMBER OF SUBJECTS IN EACH GROUP RESPONDING TO THE FIFTH (AND MOST DEMANDING) REQUEST FROM THE CONFEDERATE, AND MEAN VERBAL ASSERTION RATING DURING THAT REQUEST FOR EACH GROUP.



Note: The confederate ceased making requests when the subject responded with an unqualified refusal. The number in each group reflects how many subjects had refused requests prior to the fifth request.

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